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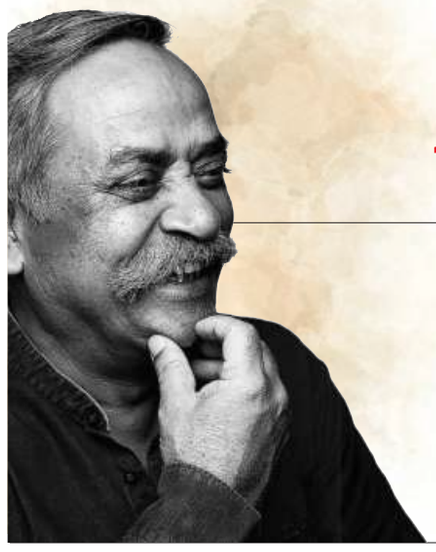

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Drawn to the rebel

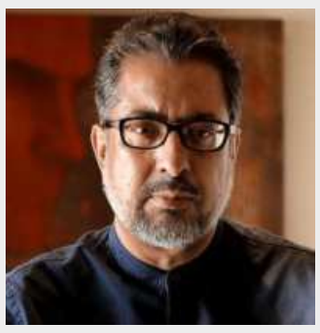
Filmmakers on the Ghatak influence

I've always been drawn to the whole impact of his work, its tenseness and emotional depth... he is unafraid and that fearlessness goes to its logical extent, taking everything in an emotional way while seeing its objective truth in a political context. How the politics of the outside world tramples on innocent lives — he tells that with great humanity and lyricism. The savage and lyrical coexist. It's very difficult to capture that. And his use of songs is beautiful: in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, for the meeting of the sister and brother, he summons a classical *alaap*; he uses the mournful *[Rabindrasangeet]* '*Je raate mor duar gulî*... in an almost romantic manner. He's quite a guy

SUDHIR MISHRA
Director

Without Ghatak, no class is complete at FTII... I was blown away by *Ajantrik*... The last scene of *Meghe Dhaka Tara* ('*dada, aami banchte chai*') chokes me. He was a super-creator, a humanist more than an ideologue... I was drawn to Ghatak's powerful images. For my films *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai (Catastrophe)* and *Xagoroloi Bohudoor* (*It's a Long Way to the Sea*), the idea of using images (village life, trees, rivers, childhood memories) to lift a film came from him

JAHNU BARUA
Director



My very first film, *Ekti Nadir Naam*, was an homage and a passionate endeavour at a dialogue with my teacher's cinema. My second film, *Qissa*, began from Ritwik*da*'s understanding of the Partition of India. And *The Song of Scorpions*, my third film, again taking from Ritwik*da*, was an attempt to study the brutalising patterns of patriarchy that prevail even within a love relationship

ANUP SINGH
Director

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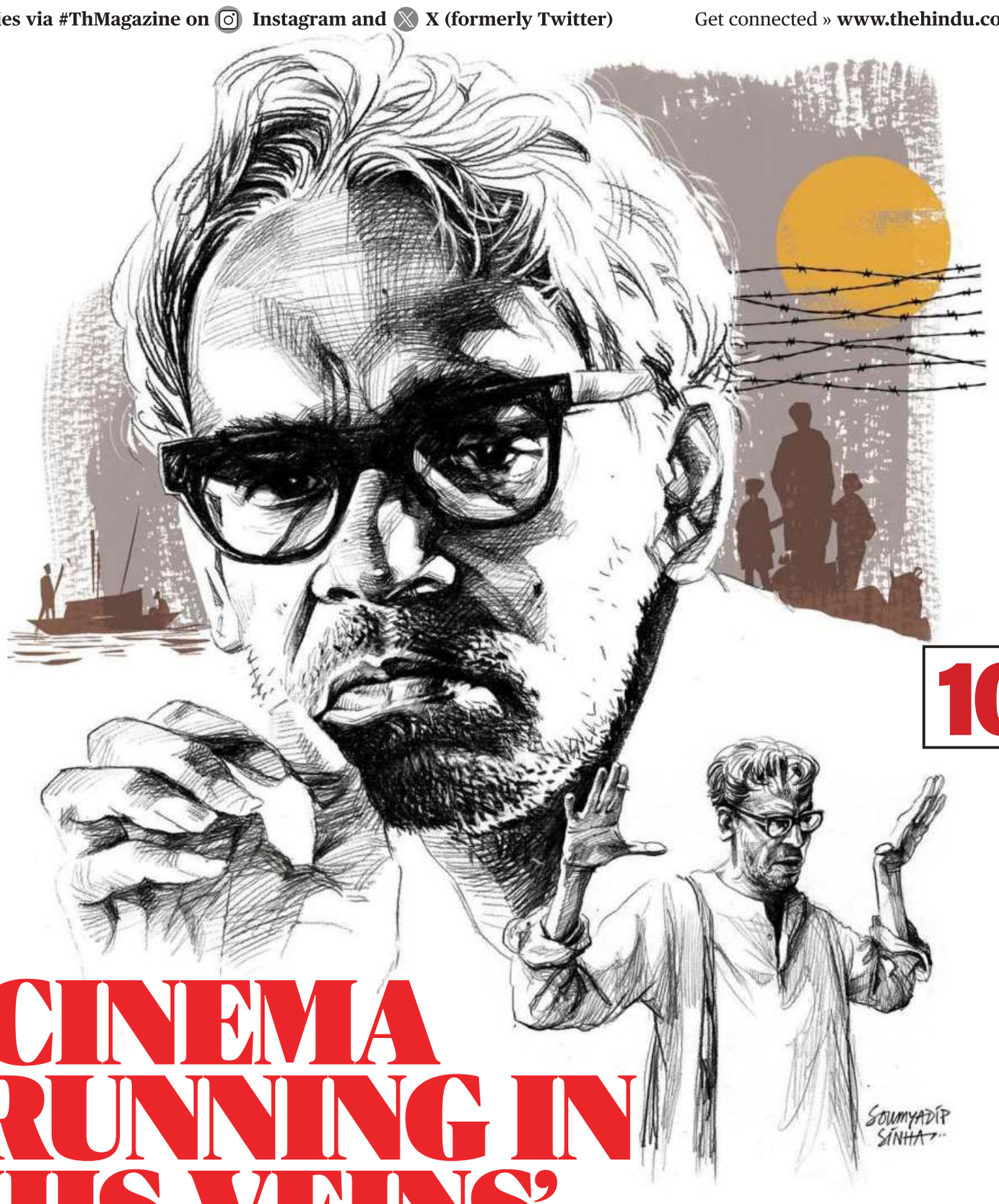


'CINEMA RUNNING IN HIS VEINS'

...said Satyajit Ray about maverick filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak, whose extra-revolutionary ideas left a mark on his peers and students alike

Adoor Gopalakrishnan

Amongst the great trinity of Bengali Cinema, Ritwik Ghatak was the youngest, the other two being Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen. He lived a short and reckless life, burning it on both ends. His passion and commitment to cinema were as intense as his political beliefs. Even his close comrades could not contain the extra-revolutionary ideas he was obsessed with, and eventually he was left with no choice but to pursue his ideology all on his own.

Ghatak was a born iconoclast. And he came to be known as the *enfant terrible* of Indian cinema. In perfect unison with his life and work, he died comparatively young, in his early 50s. His life and contributions have been unique. There were no parallels; he had no competitors, not even imitators.

Starting with *Bari Theke Paliye* (1958), each of his films was a testament to his uncompromising spirit and ceaseless struggles. It was in 1963, my second year at the Film Institute of India, that he joined us as the Vice Principal and Professor of Film Direction. We had heard about his incredible adventures (in theatre and cinema) and his accomplishments, and were in awe and admiration. Naturally, we were looking forward to watching his films and listening to him. When it happened, we were thrilled, excited and enthused.

He never fought shy of speaking about his films. He would tell us why he broke the basic rule of observing the imaginary line that helps keep the gaze of the characters in the right direction. We also came to learn from him the potential of sound to enhance the effect of a particular scene and add new dimensions to viewers' perception. His uncompromising and passionate approach to filmmaking, as expressed in his extensive and in-depth discourses, was the most impressive and rewarding aspect of his teaching for us students.

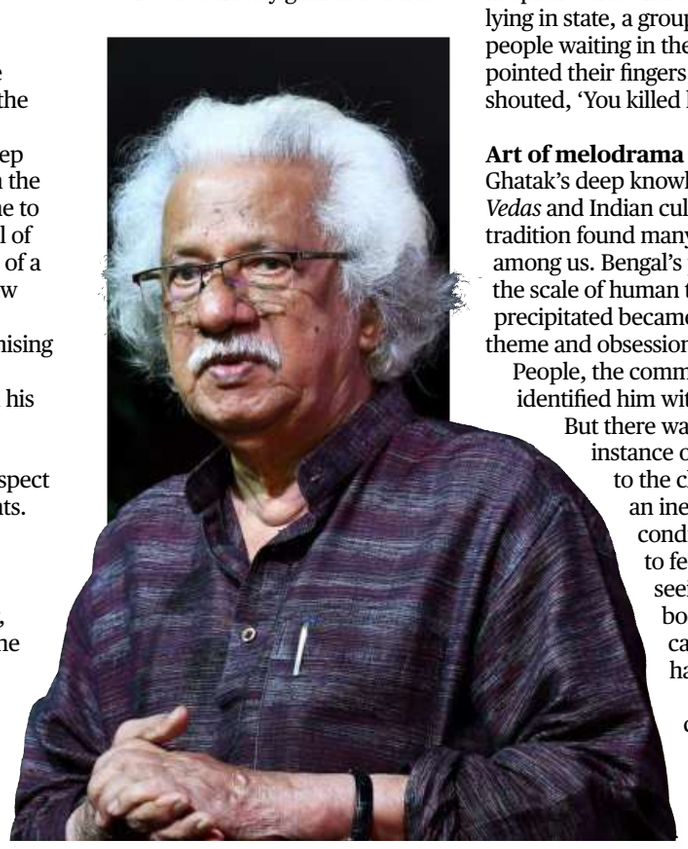
Equation with Ray

Luis Buñuel, the Spanish-Mexican filmmaker, was Ghatak's favourite and he was an admirer of his 1959 film, *Nazarin*. He did not seem to appreciate Swedish director Ingmar Bergman. He was dismissive about his religiosity.

Once when he screened Ray's film, *Aparajito*, in the classroom, he pointed out certain sequences to say, 'Here is great cinema!'. This turned out to be a revelation to us who had been under the wrong notion that Ray and Ghatak were adversaries. Far from it, the truth was the two had great admiration for each other.

It was a closely guarded secret that it was Ray who recommended Ghatak to Indira Gandhi, the then Minister of Information & Broadcasting, for appointment to the Institute. Ghatak elicited appreciation from Ray too, as opposed to what was commonly believed and propagated. Ray once told me, "Ghatak is someone who has cinema running in his veins." Not a small compliment from a person unfairly pictured as an adversary.

In this context, I am reminded of a painful incident Ray narrated to me once. On learning about Ghatak's death in a hospital in Kolkata, Ray went to pay his last respects. As he came out of the hospital ward where the body was lying in state, a group of young people waiting in the veranda pointed their fingers at Ray and shouted, 'You killed him.'



Filmmaker Adoor Gopalakrishnan who studied under Ritwik Ghatak at Pune's Film Institute of India in the early 1960s. (R. RAVINDRAN)

Art of melodrama

Ghatak's deep knowledge of the *Vedas* and Indian culture and tradition found many an admirer among us. Bengal's partition and the scale of human tragedy it precipitated became a recurring theme and obsession of his films.

People, the common lot, always identified him with alcoholism. But there was not a single instance of him coming to the classroom in an inebriated condition. I used to feel impressed seeing the new books he always carried in his hands.

Ghatak's cinematic exercises were unique in their erratic charm, conceptual originality, untamed creative energy, and incisive observation of everyday life. His pervading preoccupation with the 'mother cult' set them apart.

Ghatak's uniqueness also lay in his mesmerising talent to transform melodrama into high art. His use of visuals and sounds were totally unconventional. In fact, he carried over a few practices from theatre (his active involvement in the famed Indian People's Theatre Association is well known) and used them in ways hitherto alien to cinema. A scene or a sequence can be 'pictured' strictly following a written script and carry forward an idea convincingly. But Ghatak handled the same scene in stark contrast to the commonplace practice. He would fill it with urgency and feeling by using unfamiliar angles, lenses, lighting, compositions, and above all, jump-cuts while smooth transitions were the norm.

Sound also played an important role in his filmmaking. It was given as much importance as the visuals. His use of sound was not just meant to suggest the atmosphere of the place of action but to elicit a dramatic impact. His soundtracks were rich with layered sounds, suggestive and reflective sounds, music and dialogue enhancing the impact of the visual narration and the theme in general. He composed his unique music himself.

Among disciples and apostles

Of the eight films Ghatak made, my favourites are *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960), *Subarnarekha* (1965), and *Ajantrik* (1958).

Bimal Roy's 1958 film *Madhumati*, the story and script written by Ghatak, is an all-time classic of Hindi cinema. Everything about it is memorable and beautiful. The story, particularly the twist at the end, the casting, songs, the passionate and tragic romance, the valley locale — it was the great combination of two outstanding filmmakers, Ghatak and Roy, that did the magic.

As I recall the old days, I realise that the admirer in me did not have a personal relationship with Ghatak. I had never met him outside the classroom. Maybe, it was because I was too shy to form a relationship with my hero of a filmmaker. There were my juniors, Mani Kaul and Kumar Shahani, in particular, who kept themselves close to him as they identified themselves as his faithful disciples and his 'apostles'.

Strange as it may look, none of Ghatak's films participated in any international film festivals during his lifetime. Nor did he travel abroad. All the same, several retrospectives of his films at international festivals followed his early and untimely demise.

It was a decade after I passed out of the Institute that I shared a film festival stage in New Delhi along with Ghatak and his close disciples. I thought I must pay my respects to my teacher and walked up to him and introduced myself, "Sir, I was a student of yours at the Institute. Do you remember me?"

He looked up at me with a vague expression and replied, "No."

And that was it.

The writer is an internationally renowned filmmaker.

Kiran Desai won the Man Booker Prize in 2006 for her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss*. (GETTY IMAGES)

IN CONVERSATION

'NOSTALGIA IS A DIRTY WORD'

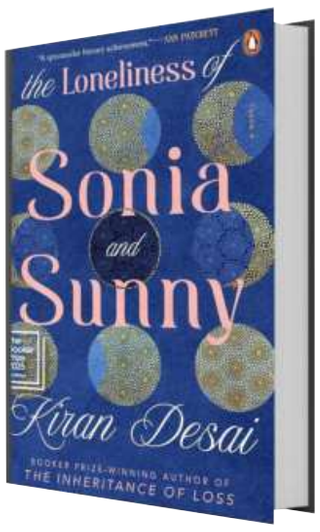
But it needn't be, says Kiran Desai as she lovingly reconstructs a bygone time in her new novel, shortlisted for this year's Booker Prize

Keshava Guha

The two most obvious facts about Kiran Desai's new novel, *The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny* (published by Penguin Hamish Hamilton), have to do with length – it is a book nearly 700 pages long, and nearly two decades in the writing. When I speak to Desai over Zoom, I begin by asking her about these two facts: or, rather, the relationship between them. Unlike so many long novels, *Sonia and Sunny* is not overstuffed with event. Its pace is lifelike: sometimes languorous, occasionally frenetic. Many thousands of pages were whittled down to the final 688.

"Each time I took out a strand," says Desai, "I had to read the whole book again" to make sure "the pacing worked, the mood shifts worked." The process was "intuitive", rather than planned. This is a word that recurs in our conversation. Desai is not one of those architect-writers for whom a book is an achievement of willed design.

The writer (and Booker Prize judge) Chris Power has described *Sonia and Sunny* as exploring and enacting "the tension between two paths for Indian fiction, social realism and magical realism". Desai accepts the characterisation



(made more obvious by Sonia reading the realist classic *Anna Karenina* while Sunny reads *Pedro Paramo*, founding text of magical realism), but says that, unlike the novel she's actually written, the one she had planned was "completely realistic". She was wary, as Sonia is, of being accused of being yet another Indian selling the "hokey realm" of the fantastical. But she found that she couldn't "encompass the entire human experience" while leaving out the element of the 'hallucinatory' and demonic.

Ocean of demons

Desai says that the 'connective tissue' of *Sonia and Sunny*, what gives the book 'its underlying structure', is the 'unseen world'; the 'esoteric'. The plot on the surface coexists with this "shadow world", one that Sonia, in particular, wrestles with. Sonia and Sunny are both writers – one a novelist, the other a journalist – and Sonia comes close to being an authorial alter ego in the manner of Philip Roth's Nathan Zuckerman. I am struck by the fact that, in a third-person novel, Sonia's family members are referred to not by name but by their relation to her ('Mama', 'Dadaji', 'Mina Foi'), while Sunny's mother is Babita. It has the effect of making Sonia almost seem like the novel's true narrator.

The idea of Sonia as alter ego was "a real battle" for Desai, who had no desire to write a 'meta' novel. But she concedes that, once she had given Sonia key elements of her own biography and made her a novelist, she began playing with, although never fully embracing, the idea of Sonia being the actual writer of this book.

Even so, Sonia's dilemmas are Desai's. She describes being interested in the kind of writer Sonia could become after overcoming the obstacles in her way. These obstacles are not, or not only, familiar writerly bugbears such as unimaginative publishers or indifferent readers. Quoting the Buddha, Desai says, "You have to go through the ocean of demons to get to the other side." The demonic in Sonia's life is represented by the cosmopolitan painter Ilan de Toorjen Foss.

Reviewers have described Ilan as an 'art monster'. On the one hand, this is a pleasing reminder of literature's enduring ability to enrich common speech (the phrase 'art monster' is from Jenny Offill's 2014 novel *Dept. of Speculation*). As a description of Ilan, however, it strikes me as too prosaic. Desai agrees. Ilan is "totally a villain", a personification of evil in the world. As children, she says, we encounter it in fairy tales, but later we're told that novels should not deal in binaries such as good and evil. But then, "At a certain point – midway through life in my experience – we realise there is really evil, and those children's stories were right all along," says Desai. To fully admit the role of evil, and the demonic, Desai had, ultimately, to look beyond the constraints and conventions of the modern novel, and of modern psychology.

Nostalgia is not a dirty word

But there is plenty of the stuff of classic realism in *Sonia and Sunny*. Like those twin peaks of 19th century fiction – *War and Peace* and *Middlemarch* – it is really a historical novel, set a whole generation before its publication (it ends in 2002, a year in which most Indians alive today were young children or not yet born). It reconstructs, lovingly, if unsentimentally, a whole material and cultural world.

Desai says that she ended where she did for the simple reason of space: the book was already long enough. But she wanted, she says, to trace the arc between her grandparents' generation – who gave up their faith and their Gujarati identity in favour of "a new sense of belonging, secular democracy" – and her own generation, where those values "were undone". As a child visiting Allahabad from Delhi, Desai's family had struck her "almost as provincial figures of fun". By the time she wrote *Sonia and Sunny*, she was full of admiration for their journey from Gujarat to Allahabad (via England), and the way in which they embraced the culture – notably the food – of their new home.

"There are uses for nostalgia," she says. "It is a dirty word but it shouldn't be, so long as you [also] show the darker sides." A novel, she says, "can work as a museum, and this novel feels like a museum of a past India". She compares what she tried to do in *Sonia and Sunny* to the urge that led Nabokov to write *Speak, Memory*: a desire to preserve the precious past in words.

By ending when she does, Desai does not write of an India that she says she no longer really knows. Quoting John Grady from Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses*, she says: "It's a good country, but it ain't my country anymore." Grady goes on to say that he doesn't know what his country is, and Desai has not traded one country for another: she is, rather, "a person without a country". Having lived in the U.S. since she was a teenager, she confesses to being quite mystified by the hold India still has on her imagination. So we can hope that she isn't finished with India just yet.

The writer is an author, most recently of The Tiger's Share.

Minting a murder

A decade on, Galbraith aka J.K. Rowling is still going strong with her Strike series. However, the magic is wearing off

Sumana Mukherjee

A still from the TV adaptation of the *Strike* novels; and (below) author J.K. Rowling. (GETTY IMAGES)

In a world where it takes barely a day after her death for environmental activist Jane Goodall's pedestal to be shaken, some credit must go to Robert Galbraith aka J.K. Rowling for continuing to churn out bestsellers years after being 'cancelled' for her problematic views on the transgender community. A *Strike* novel is still an event for her fans and mystery nerds (not always coincident groups) but with *The Hallmarked Man* – the eighth book in the Strike-Robin series – the excitement seems as tepid as the book is turgid.

A peculiarity of the Strike novels – distinct from much current detective fiction – is that after the reader finally turns the last page, having discovered all the answers and resigned themselves to a few loose ends the police will tie up, they might find themselves wondering what exactly happened. Right from the first instalment, *The Cuckoo's Calling* (2013), the series has been known for seriously picturesque murders, so fantastic even the TV show can't do them justice and frequently tamps them down. Often, as with *The Hallmarked Man*, that is the only image that survives the tome.

While the body in *The Silkworm* (2014) still tops that graphic game for this reviewer, the newest isn't far behind. A mutilated body is found in a vault in a silver shop; all the bits that could lead to an ID have been hacked away. How do you solve a murder when you don't have a name for the victim? It's an interesting premise that upends the traditional conundrum: without the who, how do you figure out the why or whodunnit?

But of course, when Cormoran Strike and Robin Ellacott are on the hunt, even the convolutedly simple isn't that straightforward – so, bring on the Freemasons, the deserted girlfriends, the leery peer, the amorous colleague (such a cliché, this one), the porn racket, the brain-damaged soldier, the Norman island of Sark and so much more, phew – and all this without counting the detective agency's various other cases that intrude on the primary investigation.

Will they, won't they?

Mind you, Galbraith is a master of layering. Despite the occasional reach and loophole, the storyline is largely convincing. I imagine her work-in-progress storyboard as vast and very crowded, with arrows and scratch-outs and cross-references with previous books and storylines. It is reflected in *The Hallmarked Man* in multiple cross-country drives, filthy weather conditions, painful negotiations of staircases, physical violence, injury and torture.

The earlier mysteries were greatly lightened by the frisson of electricity between Strike and Robin; that tension, however, is sadly missing in the eighth edition of the longest courtship ritual in English literature. Strike spends the entire book wondering whether to voice his feelings or not while Robin voices them too much – to the wrong person. This annoyingly adolescent behaviour in two highly intelligent adults is enough to make the reader want to sit them down, bang their heads together and make them speak to each other.

It's a pity because, like in her previous outings, Galbraith's concerns in this novel base themselves in the churn of contemporary British society, showing up here in casual conceptions, loosening family bonds, the abuse and exploitation of marginalised young people (of cis-het persuasion, admittedly), venal politicians, the careless elite, growing authoritarianism and hate.

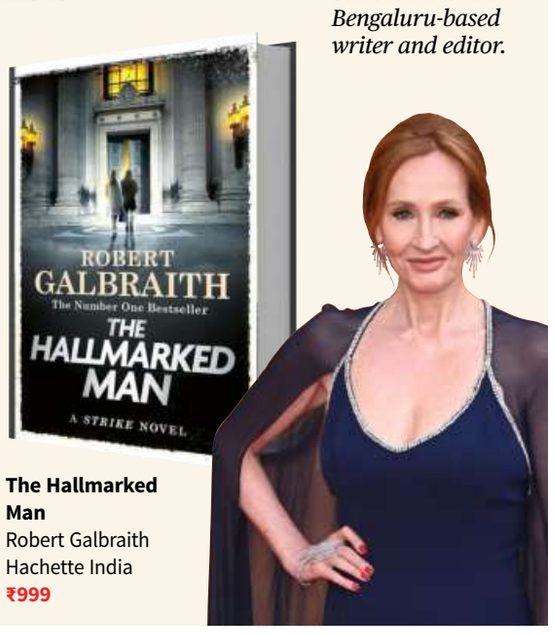
But it would take a seriously committed reader to separate the grain from the chaff (well, not all of us are Strike or Robin) and discern the import of these underpinning strands, well-hidden as they are under piles of the extraneous.

Only two more to go

Sometime about Galbraith's third book, the Strike page count began to grow, with the addition of subplots and verbiage galore. Though *The Hallmarked Man* clocks in at only 912 pages (down from the 1,024 pages of the previous book, *The Ink Black Heart*), the potential reader would be well advised to find an e-reader for the book – and not only to save themselves a sprained wrist: it's virtually impossible otherwise to keep track of characters and places through this doorstopper.

That said, with Galbraith promising the series maxes out at 10 books, there are only two more outings for Strike and Robin. While the series misses out on framing a larger, intentional narrative, this one's worth a read for old times' sake.

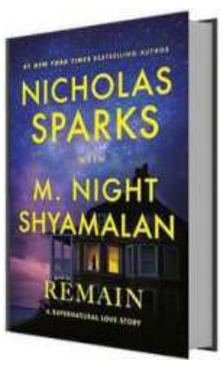
The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based writer and editor.



The Hallmarked Man
Robert Galbraith
Hachette India
₹999

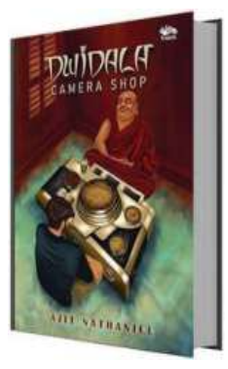
BROWSER

Remain
Nicholas Sparks, M. Night Shyamalan
Sphere
₹499
This supernatural romance about an architect mourning his sister, and who then gets attracted to a woman with a dark past, is being made into a film, starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Phoebe Dynevor (of *Bridgerton* fame). Directed by Shyamalan, it releases next October.



Half Light
Mahesh Rao
Hamish Hamilton
₹699
In his atmospheric new novel that begins in the misty hills of Darjeeling before shifting to bustling Mumbai, the Kenya-born author explores a tale of forbidden desire between two young men from very different worlds, living in an India on the brink of decriminalising homosexuality.

Dwidala Camera Shop
Ajit Nathaniel
Vitasta
₹399
The debut novelist draws from his life and experiences as a techie and photography enthusiast to pen a story about an entrepreneur who retreats to a remote Uttarakhand town to recover from a broken marriage and find renewed purpose. There, he meets a Buddhist monk who collects rare cameras.



Railsong
Rahul Bhattacharya
Bloomsbury
₹799
'I would follow Miss Chitol to the ends of the earth for the continued joy of her company,' says Women's Prize-winning author Kamila Shamsie about the protagonist of this novel. Bhattacharya paints a poignant picture of a young woman striking out on her own in 20th century India.

Having revisited her growing up years in a new memoir, the Nobel laureate talks about being a rebel in Oxford, romance and her moments of doubt

MALALA RECLAIMS HER STORY

Radhika Santhanam
radhika.s@thehindu.co.in

Malala Yousafzai cannot understand why people are shocked that she has grown up. "When people meet me, they still think about the story of a 15-year-old Malala," she says during an interview over a Zoom call.

It is 10 a.m. on the east coast of the United States, where Malala has flown to promote her memoir, *Finding My Way* (published by Orion Publishing Group/ Hachette India). Dressed in a white sweater and a purple scarf, her hair cascading over her shoulders, she admits that book tours can be hectic.

The story of 15-year-old Malala, who was shot in the head by the Taliban simply for going to school, was chronicled in the book, *I Am Malala*. Now, at 28, the activist is eager to remind us that she is not frozen in time. "Whenever I meet people, they call me brave and strong," she says. "And I pause and wonder whether I am really meeting those definitions. Hopefully, when people read my new story, they will realise that I am not confident all the time and that I do have moments of doubt."

Making friends on campus

In *Finding My Way*, Malala writes about her life after the attack and how she navigated early adulthood. With a bullet lodged in her skull, Malala was whisked away from Pakistan to Birmingham. Far from being the celebrity activist that the world knew, she was often ignored by her classmates there, and lonely. But she studied hard and earned a place at Oxford University.

Ironically, for a fierce advocate of education, Malala's priority was not studies; it was making friends. She writes, "There's a saying that every Oxford student knows: 'College is study, sleep, and social life – but you can only pick two'. It didn't take long to decide that one was enough for me."

Refusing to be tied down either by rigid Pashtun norms or her public image, Malala became a rebel in college, attending parties, rowing in jeans (which caused a controversy in Pakistan), and climbing the bell tower at night. In the midst of discovering herself, she continued to give talks around the world to pay for her parents' mortgage. All this activity naturally took a toll on her grades.

As with any young adult coming into their own in college, Malala writes that she had a fraught relationship with her mother, who constantly monitored what she wore, scolded her, and once even smacked Prince Harry's arm when he draped it around her daughter's shoulders. Malala has always admitted in interviews that she has been closer to her father.

But during this interview, she is eager to unpack the reasons behind her complex relationship with her mother, whose unsparing nature, she believes, stems from a desire to shield her from the violence of patriarchy. "My mum is a fascinating, strong woman. She has been strict and she has told me off many times, but that's because she is always concerned. Her natural instinct is to do everything she can to protect a girl from harm because, in her village, girls and women were not just told off when they did something 'wrong'; they were pulled out of school, never allowed to work, and killed in the name of honour."

Over time, she and her mother have often found ways of thrashing out their differences, she says. "I tell her that people from certain communities will always find an excuse to silence a woman. As soon as a girl starts to have a voice and follow her dreams, they begin having a problem with everything she does, from what she wears to how she keeps her hair. So, now we have come to some sort of an

agreement." Surprisingly, neither of her parents had read the book at the time of the interview. Malala tells me that keeping the book away from them was a "hard but important decision to take," so she could be true to her own story.

Life after marriage

It is this same fierce independence that has shaped her romantic life as well. When she was at Oxford, Malala met Asser, a good-looking cricket manager from Lahore. She writes in endearing detail about young love and about her reservations on marriage – an institution that she always deemed patriarchal and unsuitable for her.

She has been married to Asser for four years and posts romantic reels with him on Instagram. I ask if her views on marriage have changed. After a long pause, she chooses her words carefully. "I realised that we could not be together unless we considered marriage. So, I started reading and discussing with my friends about marriage, its history, its cultural contexts... and I realised that the most important thing is for my husband and I to have mutual respect and love for each other, to have the same understanding of marriage, and to make it fun."

She quickly clarifies that this is by no means a promotion of marriage. "We have to keep questioning it, addressing the issues within it, and finding ways of redefining it and making it beautiful for both partners," she says. She admits that she is also in a better space mentally, after having gone through therapy consistently to deal with panic attacks and post-traumatic stress disorder. "I was of the view that true bravery meant never going through fear or having moments of doubt. But I realised through my journey that true bravery and courage mean to get up even though you have moments of darkness."

For a public figure like Malala, who, on Instagram, describes herself as being "chronically online," comments on social media can take a toll on her mental well-being, but she says she has learnt to deal with it. What she does find more frustrating is misinformation. "It is when people tell me I have been silent about certain issues or about girls in certain parts of the world and it is simply not true! All you have to do is Google it." Addressing the criticism that she hasn't supported the cause of Palestine consistently and publicly, she pointedly mentions that the Malala Fund works in Gaza too, supporting Palestinian women and girls.

Supporting women's causes

The support Malala extends to women and girls is no longer confined to the classroom; she has also started a production company that provides women of colour an opportunity to tell their own stories and a project with Asser to create opportunities for women in sports.

While these projects are being rolled out, there are still parts of the world that lag far behind, especially in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, she says. Recalling how the Taliban stormed back to power in 2021, just as she was undergoing final surgery to recover her facial nerve, she says, "It was shocking that the Taliban, who are the perpetrators, had been given a second chance, while the women, who are the victims, had been told to accept this 'different' Taliban. We have enough evidence that the Taliban have not changed." She says the Malala Fund is continuing to build pressure on world leaders to acknowledge and address what women are going through in Afghanistan; the Taliban are on an official visit to India as we speak.

In college, Malala, the Nobel Prize winner, spent nights worrying not just about girls across the world, but also about her own future. I ask, quite sincerely, whether she still does.

"I am in a much better place now," she smiles. "You know, someone asked me once if getting shot was a blessing in disguise. Obviously not. But I have been working my whole life to make it a blessing. That's my way of coping, of healing, and of finding hope."

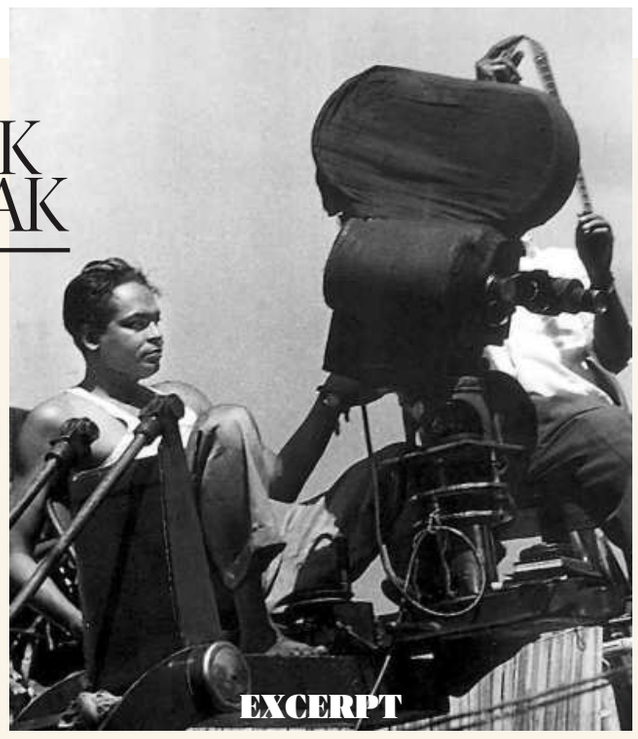
> It was shocking that the Taliban, who are the perpetrators, had been given a second chance, while the women, who are the victims, had been told to accept this 'different' Taliban. We have enough evidence that the Taliban have not changed

Malala Yousafzai is the youngest Nobel Prize laureate in history and received the prize in 2014 at the age of 17. (GETTY IMAGES)

100 YEARS OF RITWIK GHATAK

Goutam Ghose

Ritwik Ghatak was born in Dhaka, and brought up on the banks of the river Padma in Rajshahi district in what is now Bangladesh. He observed the clashes of nation and nationhood, society, human life, and showcased it all in his cinema, his stories, his plays and in his thoughts, which he wasn't shy to share. With the world today rife with instances of forced migration, his work is as relevant as ever. An edited excerpt from Unmechanical: Ritwik Ghatak in 50 Fragments, *a book of essays and reminiscences.*



Breaking the frame

Enfant terrible of Bengali cinema, Ritwik Ghatak, who would have turned 100 on November 4, bent every rule in the book

Ritwikda was almost oblivious to American cinema and its techniques, the narrative styles. Like long shot, mid-shot, close-up. Ritwikda didn't follow that.

Instead, he used *mise en scène*, which he had learnt in the theatre. Whether in *Nagarik*, which was his first film and quite raw, perhaps even amateurish, or in *Ajantrik*, which was a film of international class. But if you look at the angles in both – or all – his films, you'll see a lot of low-angle shots. He was a tall man, but his angles were low. He wanted to see his characters in that frame, not in separate cut shots. The style was evident in *Nagarik* itself.

Ritwik Ghatak behind the camera. (FILE PHOTO)

'Wrong grammar'

As we see more of his work, we see how he shatters the imaginary lines of filmmaking. A long shot, and then an extreme close-up of the character's eyes. This was wrong grammar. But he didn't believe in that. To him, cinema was a continuous process, a creative process, and while the grammar of cinema had its place, it was also possible to twist and break it. I have heard Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Kumar Shahani, Mani Kaul and others, who were his students at the film institute in Pune, talk about this. He would tell them, 'Learn the grammar of cinema but only to learn how to break it.'

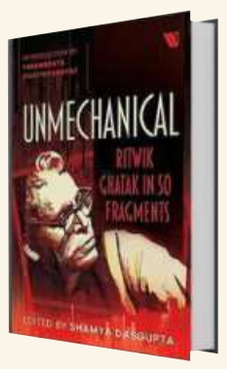
He used to cite the example of *Ulysses*. When you read James Joyce's *Ulysses* the first time, you might find it impossible to comprehend. But if you keep reading it, you realise that Joyce had internalised the grammar of the language so well that he could shatter it the way he did.

Ritwikda just thought differently. You look at his frames, his angles, they were all uniquely his own. And, though people say he was undisciplined and wayward, I think he was deeply committed to cinema, and never wavered from that commitment. People talk about the use of melodrama in his films. I find it quite odd when I hear that. There is no melodrama in his films. Ritwikda would approach an issue with his unique lens and attack certain notions. What people call melodrama in the formal sense, puts things in a box. I think Ritwikda used it not quite that same way, but for an effect. Which, to me, was not melodrama, but impact.

Power of cinema

Let me try to explain. Think of the scene towards the end of *Subarnarekha*, where Iswar, looking for a woman to spend the night with, enters his sister Sita's quarters. What happens there can be categorised as melodrama. But to me it's shock therapy. The audience will be stunned. That's also the job of the director, to stun the audience into silence, shake them up. Ritwikda was very conscious of these things and did it very deliberately. Similarly, if you look at his use of sound, the sound montage, Ritwikda experimented with it a great deal. We see it in *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Komal Gandhar*, where an independent folk music track travels through the film, creating a parallel mood.

There are many moments which tell you that Ritwikda wasn't in this game to just tell a linear story. He wanted to exploit the power of cinema. The time and space of cinema is completely different from real time and real space. In cinema, you can manipulate time and space. You can tell a tale spanning thousands of years in two hours, and you can tell a two-hour story in two hours. This is the power of the language of cinema. He knew how to use this intelligently. He didn't just use myths and archetypes for the heck of using them.



Unmechanical: Ritwik Ghatak in 50 Fragments
Ed. Shamya Dasgupta
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THE MANY AFTERLIVES OF GHATAK IN BOLLYWOOD

A look at the filmmaker's imprint in the Hindi films of Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Vidhu Vinod Chopra and Subhash Ghai — former students of FTII where the Bengali auteur taught briefly

Sohini Chattopadhyay

The film lover's conventional view is 'what if'. What if Ritwik Ghatak's *Nagarik*, completed in 1952 but unreleased till his death, was released before Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali* in 1955? Would the posthumous outsize legacy that arrived in the decades since he has gone be his in his lifetime?

But this is a 'what is' statement, not a 'what if' piece. What is uncontestably true is that Ghatak's legacy in mainstream Hindi film is more palpable, and arguably more celebrated, than the legacy of Ray and Mrinal Sen, his contemporaries in the so-called holy trinity. Ray gets more lip service from mainstream Hindi filmmakers, and Sen gets more nods in the work – for instance, in the use of the narrative voiceover, in popular Hindi film's love for self-referencing as we see in Yash Raj and Dharma films. But that is another essay.

There are two reasons why Ghatak has a more direct footprint in popular Hindi film. One is his much-talked about use of melodrama as a form. The other is his stint in the Film and Television Institute of India as a teacher. By accounts available online, this was only over the period 1965-1966, but clearly it was a potent couple of years given the number of acknowledgements he received from figures such as Vidhu Vinod Chopra, Sanjay Leela Bhansali and Payal Kapadia. (Kapadia's documentary *A Night of Knowing Nothing* features a mural of Ghatak at the FTII campus.)

Melodrama reimagined

First, melodrama. Mainstream Hindi film is considered melodramatic, whereas arthouse film, particularly Indian arthouse shaped by post-war Italian neorealism and the French new wave, prefers realism. This, obviously, is a vast generalisation – Ghatak himself is arthouse yet melodramatic – but for now, let it stand. Given this kinship of melodrama, the man's presence is naturally palpable in mainstream Hindi film, including those of today.

How do I understand Ghatak's use of melodrama? The standard definition of melodrama is a plot where much happens, including a reliance on coincidences, and sentiments are overheated, the sum of it veering towards exaggeration. Realism tends towards simpler, slices-of-everyday life plots. In Ghatak's best-known work *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, it is not enough that the protagonist Neeta (Supriya Choudhury) has to give up her studies, and loses her suitor to her sister to support her Partition refugee family, but she must also contract a deadly form of tuberculosis that consumes her, literally.

In *Subarnarekha*, it is not enough that the heroine Seeta (Madhabi Mukherjee) is estranged from her beloved brother Ishwar, loses her husband to a tragic accident, and is forced to take up sex work to support herself, but also that her very first client is the same estranged older brother (by coincidence). This kind of heated plot development is much closer to Bollywood.

Ghatak pioneered one of Bollywood's most distinctive tropes – reincarnation – with his story for Bimal Roy's *Madhumati*, the highest-grossing Hindi film of 1958. The film itself has had several re-incarnations in Bollywood, most prominently Subhash Ghai's *Karz* (1980), and in part, Farah Khan's *Om Shanti Om* (2007).

Ghai is often listed as one of Ghatak's students at FTII, which is my second argument for Ghatak's palpable presence in Bollywood today. His list of direct students is said to include Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Mani Kaul, Kumar Shahani, Saeed Akhtar Mirza, and Ghai. But the two major directors who mention him often are Sanjay Leela Bhansali and Vidhu Vinod Chopra. Did they study directly under him? Perhaps Chopra, who has said in his interviews that Ghatak named him 'Bidhu'.

Sound psychology

But their work carries imprints of Ghatak. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, Ghatak used the sound of a whip unforgettably to underline his heroine Neeta's suffering. When she walks down the stairs from her boyfriend's apartment on sensing the presence of another woman, there is the sound of a whip. Incongruent, it would seem. Why do we hear a whip when we should hear the sound of steps or even other people's voices?

Later, when Neeta breaks down after singing a song, practising for her sister's nuptials with her former boyfriend, we hear that whip again, lashing her again and again. This time, the message becomes clear: it is code to her inner being.

In *Devdas*, Bhansali uses the same sound when Devdas is leaving his ancestral palace as a young man (incidentally, as he is storming down the stairs) to protest his father's orders. Choosing between his imperious father, whose approval he craves all his life, and his first love, is for Devdas akin to being lashed.

This is direct Ghatak, who elevated the use of sound in film to psychological strategy. But there is also indirect Ghatak in Bhansali's work: his main characters often die or kill themselves, something we see in Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, *Subarnarekha*, *Titash Ekti Nadir Naam*. Moreover, there is an emotional streak running to madness that we see often in Bhansali's characters – whether Devdas (Shah Rukh Khan) who drinks himself to death because his father humiliates his love Paro, or Sameer (Salman Khan) who keeps talking to his long-dead father in *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, or Peshwa Bajirao I (Ranveer Singh) who dies hallucinating in a fever, fighting an imaginary battle after he learns that his mother and elder son Nana Saheb have imprisoned his wife Mastani. There is in all of them an excessive stubbornness, like Neeta in *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, who continues to bear her family's ceaseless demands without letting on.

Romance of childhood

Chopra has a penchant for childhood friends turning lovers. In his acclaimed, and to my mind, finest, film *Parinda*, Karan (Anil Kapoor) and Paro (Madhuri Dixit) are childhood mates, who become lovers. We see this also in *Mission Kashmir* – when Altaf (Hrithik Roshan) meets Sufiya (Preity Zinta) at an event, he references a conversation they had left incomplete as children. In Ghatak's *Subarnarekha*, Sita and Abhiram are foster siblings and childhood playmates, who fall in a love great enough for her to defy her guardian-like elder brother. In *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, we don't know precisely when Neeta met her boyfriend Sanat, but he is her schoolteacher father's student suggesting that the pair knew each other from adolescence. In *Bari Theke Paliye*, Ghatak pitches the entire film on the point of view of the eight-year-old Kanchan.

The child is important to Ray as well – so much of *Pather Panchali* is from the boy Apu's point of view. But Ray, arguably, would not see a childhood friendship through the lens of a grand romance. There is something fundamentally melodramatic about that, in that it privileges the emotional over all else.

Other film fans will point to more Ghatak references, remembrances, homages, and holograms. His work and admirers continue to grow. I'll end with a delicious anecdote that the National Award-winning film critic Alaka Sahani wrote in an article titled "A River Named Ritwik" (in *The Indian Express*). A few days before his death, he consoled his daughter Samhita that his films would be appreciated after his death. Like the melodramatic stories he loved to tell where justice is hard to find in this life, Ghatak portended his own glorious ghost story.

The writer is the author of The Day I Became a Runner, *and a National Award-winning film critic.*

Reincarnations (Clockwise from below) Supriya Choudhury in a still from Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* (1960); filmmakers Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Subhash Ghai, and Vidhu Vinod Chopra; and stills from Chopra's *Mission Kashmir* (2000); and Bhansali's *Devdas* (2002). (COURTESY S.M.M. AUSAJA ARCHIVE AND GETTY IMAGES)

Screenings and talks

- **RE-THINKING LEGACY | NOV. 3-4**
At the two-day international festival on 'Ritwik Ghatak as a System of Thought', speakers include scholar Ira Bhaskar and Erin O'Donnell, assistant professor of Asian History at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania. A practitioners' roundtable will include film and video editor Sharmistha Jha and filmmaker, photographer, and cinematographer Debalina Majumder. At St. Xavier's College (Nov. 3); and Bhawanipur Education Society College (Nov. 4). Entry fee: ₹600 (₹300 for students). Contact: 9830656641, 9903553892.

- **CINEMA OF EMPATHY | NOV. 4**
A restored version of *Subarnarekha* will be screened. Sunny Joseph, cinematographer and director from Kerala, will deliver a talk on 'Cinema of Empathy – A Journey from Ghatak to AI Films'. At SRFTI Main Auditorium, Kolkata, Nov. 4. Details: Instagram @sjccchry

- **NEW GEN FILMMAKERS | NOV. 6-13**
A series of Ghatak films will be screened at Kolkata International Film Festival, including *Ajantrik*, *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam*, and *Bari Theke Paliye*. Multiple venues. Details: kiff.in

- **GURU DUTT AND RITWIK GHATAK AT 100 | NOV 6-8**
Organised by cinema studies expert Daniel Morgan and historian Rochona Majumdar, 'Varieties of Melodrama' includes screenings of Ghatak and Guru Dutt's films. At the University of Chicago. Details: cms.uchicago.edu

100 YEARS OF RITWIK GHATAK

HIS KOLKATA STILL EXISTS

How Ghatak's unique portrayal of his city showed it as a place of hope and refuge for migrants

Bishwanath Ghosh
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There are two ways we get to see – and know – a city: by setting foot in it, and through cinema. In the case of cinema too, there are two ways to become familiar with a place: through commercial movies and through realistic portrayals. As far as realistic portrayal is concerned, there are three well-known ways of looking at the city of Kolkata: through the eyes of Satyajit Ray, of Mrinal Sen and of Ritwik Ghatak, the holy trinity of Indian parallel cinema.

They shot their films in Kolkata – Calcutta back then – during the same time when, unlike other cities that were beginning to kindle dreams, Calcutta, having long reached the pinnacle of glory, was on the decline. But even then, the depictions were different. For Ray, Kolkata was more of a socio-political entity on whose vast surface humanity played out its part. For Sen, it was the 'El Dorado' – the magical, mystical city he adored.

Ghatak's portrayal, however, was unique. To him, the city itself was also a character, giving refuge to the displaced. A place, itself devoid of emotions, like a strict, non-demonstrative father or teacher, seemingly unsympathetic and uncaring, but which had hidden humane nerves.

City on the move

Ghatak's 1958 film *Bari Theke Paliye* opens with a mischievous boy, who has a dislike for his strict father, running away to Calcutta, which he calls "El Dorado", "where night is as bright as the day". The city is introduced with the sun rising over the Howrah Bridge. That's exactly how Kolkata is introduced to hundreds of new arrivals every morning even today. Not exactly a city of opportunities or dreams, but still a city where many run away carrying hope, or for survival.

If you discount the absence of trams (almost extinct now) and if you ignore the phones in people's hands, one could still be in 1958: the bridge occupied with people at the crack of dawn; workers carrying loads on their heads, their movement somewhere between a walk and a jog; men pushing carts laden with a mountain of sacks. Every labourer looks – and is – busier than a doctor or a CEO: they have no time to lose; Kolkata moves because they move.

If Howrah Bridge depicts arrival, search for opportunities happens in places with tall buildings. Much of those places stand even today, so much so that if Ghatak were to return with his camera, he wouldn't find much missing except the trams and perhaps phone booths and hungry people on the streets.

High-ceilinged office buildings with broad staircases and large windows; a parallel ecosystem thriving on the pavements right outside – barbers, food vendors, stationery sellers; and on the wide roads a stream of humanity, each with a story that could be another *Meghe Dhaka Tara* or *Subarnarekha*. Since Kolkata takes pride in being a once-upon-a-time city, it is unlikely those watching Ghatak's films, for at least another few decades, will find much of a difference between then and now.

Meeting of two migrants

Yet, a lot of water has flown under the Howrah Bridge since his time. Ghatak dwelt on the subject of Bengal's partition, dedicating a trilogy to it in the first half of the 1960s. But those refugee colonies his stories were set in are today a thing of the past: they have evolved into neighbourhoods that belong to the City of Joy. In any case, unlike in Punjab, the refugee movement was not a one-time event in Bengal: people migrated over decades, the final massive exodus taking place in the early 1970s. Memories of bad days, therefore, are not confined to 1947 alone.

One of the organisations to first hold an event this year to mark Ghatak's centenary was the West Bengal Hindi Speakers' Society, which had a screening of *Subarnarekha*, the third in the filmmaker's Partition trilogy, as long back as on June 8. Ashok Singh, general secretary of the society, who is a former head of the Hindi department at Surendranath Evening College, had said at the time, "He is my most favourite filmmaker. If you see Ray's films or Mrinal Sen's films, you will find Hindi-speaking people shown as either drivers or doormen. Whereas if you watch Ghatak's *Bari Theke Paliye*, you will see a boy running away from his village to the big city of Calcutta being shown kindness by a Hindi-speaking man on the road selling *sattu*. Such a humane portrayal of the meeting of two migrants!"

Every city is a city of migrants. Ritwik Ghatak, perhaps the only one to dwell on the subject, showed that even Kolkata is one.

A river runs through it Kolkata by the Howrah Bridge; and (top) actor Madhabi Mukherjee with director Ghatak (extreme right) on the sets of *Subarnarekha*. (GETTY IMAGES AND S.M.M. AUSAJA ARCHIVE)

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT 101 WITH PROF. G.I. BUSTARD
SELDOM DO INDIA'S ENERGY MINISTRY AND ITS ENDANGERED WILDLIFE AGREE OVER ANYTHING, BUT I ADMIT THAT I AGREE WHOLLY WITH ONE OF ITS OPINIONS—
THAT ALL OF INDIA'S WASTELANDS MUST BE UTILIZED TO BUILD MEGA SOLAR FARMS, TO PROPEL THE NATION TOWARDS ACHIEVING ITS SDGs.
TO HELP THE MINISTRY, I HAVE SELECTED SOME LITERAL AND ABJECT WASTELANDS THAT CONTRIBUTE NOTHING TO PUBLIC WELL-BEING, TO BE REPLACED IMMEDIATELY WITH SOLAR FARMS:
IFI
JOHN

WALKING A TIGHTROPE IN THALASSERY

In K.R. Sunil's black and white photographs, the story behind India's circus capital comes alive

Anasuya Menon
anasuya.m@thehindu.co.in

Between the 1960s and '90s, when the circus artists returned home, the villages of Thalassery celebrated. They made a grand entry – in taxi cars, dressed in flamboyant clothes, faces dusted with talcum powder, bodies bathed in "scent". The metallic trunk boxes they brought with them carried magical knick-knacks from faraway lands. And for the villagers who looked on, these men and women radiated hope.

Today, some of these yesteryear superstars live on in Thalassery, dealing with the poverty they once sought to escape – wracked by age, maimed, and shorn of stardust. By the mid-90s, the entertainment industry had evolved and laws pertaining to animal and child welfare changed. The golden age of the circus had come to an end.

Extraordinary world

Kodungallur-based photographer K.R. Sunil, 50, in his series *Thambu – Tales from the Great Indian Circus*, on show in Mumbai, chronicles the circus performers of Kerala's Thalassery. He creates a stirring narrative of their lives while documenting Thalassery's role in producing some of the country's finest circus performers. "My photographs are of people and communities often forgotten or overlooked by the world," says Sunil, who took up photography in 2014.

The exhibition, curated by Zurich-based Asian Contemporary Fine Art founder Birgid Uccia, comprises black-and-white portraits of 46 artists, bridging their past and present. Over multiple visits to their homes, Sunil gained access to a treasure trove of old photographs, which are part of the show.

He was drawn to the subject after a chance meeting with Kamala, a veteran circus artist, in Salem in 2016. "Orphaned at an early age, Kamala left her hometown in Nepal at the age of five and joined a group of travellers. She met a hotel owner in Kolkata, who introduced her to a Malayali circus manager. Thus began her journey, which led her to becoming an integral part of the Great Bombay Circus. She married Gopalan Mulloli, a performer from Thalassery, and the couple founded their own circus, Rajkamal, while they were in Zira, Punjab," says Sunil. "Kamala recalled how they collected discarded circus tent materials from various places they travelled to and stitched them together to bring their own circus to life," he adds.

Kamala had a quirk. "She owned a home in Thalassery, but preferred to travel with her troupe, sleep in circus tents and surround herself with the sights and sounds of the only life she had known," he says. Kamala died in 2019. Moved by her story, Sunil began following these artists, initially with the help of a young man, Vikas Karayi, whose own father, a flying trapeze artist, had fallen to his death during an act. Over three years, he spent around 150 days in the city, documenting these artists' lives. "Though some of them were doing well, most were struggling. Their eyes always lit up when they spoke about the way they spun in hoops and swung from the trapeze," says Sunil. "They really were stars. Politicians, including Jawaharlal Nehru, and actors like Raj Kapoor and Kamal Haasan were among those who went to watch their shows," he adds.

Sunil met Moorkkoth Vengakkandi Sankaran – popularly known as Gemini Sankar, the founder of Gemini Circus – at the age of 99, just before died in 2023. A jovial man, he spoke animatedly about his encounter with actor Raj Kapoor at his circus in Mumbai, which was the set of Kapoor's iconic film *Mera Naam Joker* (1970). As the film became a hit, Gemini Circus soared in popularity," says Sunil, who co-wrote the script for the 2025 Mohanlal-Tharun Moorthy Malayalam thriller *Thudarum*.

Ticket out of poverty

For the villagers, the circus was a ticket to escape abject poverty. Families sent their children, in the hope that they would make money. These children, called "*Companykuttikal*" (children of the employees of the British East India Company), grew up in the tents (*thambu* in Malayalam), where religion, caste, nationality and language were no barriers. "Life inside the tents was gruelling – training went on for hours and they were made to do impossible stunts. Some would even get hurt in the process, but that was part of the deal," says Sunil.

The people of Thalassery have circus in their blood, believed 'Hippo' Janaki, "who joined the Great Oriental Circus when she was eight. She earned the title 'Hippo' because of her exceptional skills with hippopotamuses. Performing alongside animals, including lions and elephants, one of her iconic roles was that of a queen, riding atop an elephant in a colourful parade", says the photographer, who met her when she was 86. Her son's birth marked the end of her career. Years later, her artist-husband Rajagopal took his own life at a lodge, unable to handle the financial burden of running a circus. Sunil stayed in the same lodge room.

Thalassery's tryst with circus began with Keeleri Kunhikannan, a reputed wrestler and Kalari master. Watching Maharashtra's Vishnupant Moreshwar Chatre's (founder of modern Indian circus) circus when it came to the Kerala city in the early 20th century, the jaw-dropping stunts impressed Kunhikannan. He decided to train his students in this new form of art that pushed the limits of the human body.

On February 4, 1904, Thalassery had its first show: the Great Malabar Circus, led by his student Paliyari Kannan. Kunhikannan's brand of circus was a curious mix of stunts that he picked up from Chatre's circus embellished with his own numbers. By the 60s, many of the circuses in India were owned by people from the ancient port town. A large part of Sunil's oeuvre dwells on lives connected to the sea: *Vanishing Life Worlds*, on the people of Ponnani (Kochi Muziris Biennale, 2016); *Manchukkar, The Seafarers of Malabar* (Uru Art Harbour, 2018); *Chavittu Nadakam: Storytellers of the Seashore* on artists living on the verge of a climate catastrophe (Uru Art Harbour, 2022).

Refuge for the marginalised

The circus was often a refuge for the marginalised. Dhanalakshmi P., who was feted by former prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, was a source of solace and strength for the young girls in her troupe. When she returned to Thalassery at the end of her career, she adopted Priya, a person with dwarfism, as her daughter. As their circus closed down, Priya had nowhere to go. Dhanalakshmi died in 2022.

Among those alive today is Prabhakaran, 70, popularly known as Two-and-a-Half Prabhakaran. The fearless trapeze artist excelled in the advanced two-and-a-half-turn leap, and regaled audiences outside the ring, too. "He was a singer as well. A most cherished memory is of acting in *Mera Naam Joker* and rubbing shoulders with actor Raj Kapoor," says Sunil. Prabhakaran's career spanned 40 years, across several circus troupes, until a mid-performance fall in Mumbai left him paralysed. "He leads a quiet life in Thalassery now," says Sunil.

Thambu – Tales from the Great Indian Circus *is on at Sakshi Gallery, Mumbai, till November 5.*

Juggling lives (Clockwise from far left) Prathap Singh, an animal trainer; Dhanalakshmi (seated) with Priya, her husband and child; Prabhakaran; Kamala with an old album; photographer K.R. Sunil; Gloria Vendrwielen; 'Hippo' Janaki. (K.R. SUNIL)

CONTINUED FROM » PAGE 1

Ghatak got the non-privileged 'gaze' right... In his films, I found vindication for the aesthetics of suffering (as opposed to 'poverty porn'). His camera didn't shy away from the tearing slipper, the rancid wound, the itchy, unshaved beard. He used his cinema to question why we compel ourselves to come to terms with displacement, inequality, suffering, bigotry. I turn to him when I feel the weight of these questions in my cinema start to crush me

DEVASHISH MAKHIJA
Filmmaker

Ghatak is like a Professor Shonku of cinema, he was his own universe, you can't put a language to him. He was audacity — what I attempted when writing *Manikbabur Megh* (*The Cloud and the Man*). Ghatak, Van Gogh, Ramkinkar Baij, and Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay were audacious humans... kings [of their domain], true artists who never gave a damn to the world, and who died early... We are urban hypocrites

ABHINANDAN BANERJEE
Director

As told to ***Tanushree Ghosh***

If Ghatak were to return [to Kolkata] with his camera, he wouldn't find much missing except the trams and perhaps phone booths and hungry people on the streets

GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 19

WHEN YOUR SHIRT SIZE IS A PUZZLE

It is the men's fit problem nobody talks about

Friends, this edition of the column is, by my count, the 19th in this fortnightly missive. Where each time, I come up with words that do not exist in the English language. But should.

And, if you have been a frequent reader, you are aware that this column is mostly just an excuse for me to complain about the things that really annoy me. Which might seem like the shallowest of reasons to write a column. But the overwhelming response to this column suggests that many of you also find the same things annoying. And each week, some of you write to me with your own expressions of annoyance and frustration.

We are, it appears, a secret society of curmudgeons. Some sort of a Lions Club of Lamenters. A Community of Complainers. And we are proud of it. All that stands between society and complacency is our brave bellyaching. Long live us.

So earlier this week, one reader wrote a brief message to me about something that really annoyed them. And it made me very happy, because I love hearing from readers, and then, very sad, because it is something that also annoys me verily.

In fact, it might be my third greatest annoyance in the world after the two worst aspects of modern human existence: shaving and ironing. I hate shaving and ironing.

Many people often ask me: 'Sidin, you've made a lot of extremely peculiar career choices. What has been your guiding factor in making these choices?'

Friends, it is simple: I will only do jobs that do not require shaving or wearing ironed clothes. If not for these aversions, I could have easily become an Ambassador, gymnast or a Chief of Army Staff. But, I have no regrets.

So, what is this third anathema? It is this: trying to figure out the size of clothes in a shop. The United Nations seems to have time for everything else. Why not clothes sizing?

Dear readers, why does it have to be so hard? Just this evening, I went to a nearby shop to buy a few items of clothing. I wanted a linen shirt, a T-shirt and a hardy sweatshirt to wear at home as the winter sharpens into focus.

First, I went to get the shirt. The salesperson informed me that I was most likely a size 42. I asked if this was a chest measurement. They said no. It is not related. It is just a measure of size. I said, fine. I will take one shirt in size 42.

Then I went to the T-shirt section. And asked a salesperson for a size 42. She looked at me as if I had just done something stupid, like have the same lifestyle in real life and on Instagram.

"T-shirts are only available in S, M, L, XL and so on, sir..." she said. "We don't do shirt sizing in the T-shirt section." She said this with such certainty as if this has been mentioned in the Magna Carta or something.

Finally, after 20 minutes, I realised that 42 in shirt size can be M, L or XL, depending on which T-shirt you are buying. So simple.

Pantemonium
/pæn'ti:məniəm/
noun
Definition: The chaotic and bewildering state of attempting to purchase clothing when every garment category uses a completely different, incompatible sizing system.
Related forms:
Pantemonious (*adjective*): Describing the anarchic sizing conditions in retail environments
Pantemoniating (*verb*): The act of navigating contradictory sizing systems

And finally, I went to the sweatshirt section. "Show me your finest sweatshirts in 42, M, L or XL," I said to a salesperson.

Who immediately picked up her phone and said, "Hey Siri, I have just met the single most ignorant customer in my life. Please add to my diary."

Why? Because it turns out that sweatshirts are only available in three fits: tailored, relaxed or oversized. Also, they are unisex.

Meanwhile, in the shoe section, my feet are apparently size 9 in the U.K., 10 in the U.S., 43 in Europe, unless I am in an airport in which case my feet are 'medium-narrow -wide-comfort-left-arm-medium-fast-pavilion-end'.

Readers, why have we all agreed to live like this? Why have we wrought this sartorial misery upon ourselves? Why can't we have a single system to measure clothing. Maybe one for men, one for women, and one for children?

Instead, we have to deal with what I am calling: pantemonium.
Example sentence: "The pantemonium reached its peak when the salesman explained that 'tailored medium' was actually larger than 'oversized small' but smaller than 'relaxed medium'."

Have you ever been a victim of pantemonium? Or has something else annoyed you recently? Please send me an email immediately in font size 12/ UK Large/ comfort fit.

***Sidin Vadukut** helps early stage companies communicate better. He blogs at www.whatay.com.*

GOREN BRIDGE

Run the long suit

Neither vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

We have seen many deals where declarer triumphs by simply running his long suit. This can create unexpected pressure on the defenders and good things might happen. Today's deal is another example.

East overtook his partner's king of diamonds lead with the ace and returned the suit. A third round was ruffed in dummy with the seven and over-ruffed by East with the eight. South took the heart shift with the ace, happy to see the queen fall from West. Two more hearts drew the trumps and South had nothing better to do than cash some more hearts. This was the position with two hearts remaining [grid 2]:

	NORTH ♠ A Q 10 9 2 ♡ 7 2 ◇ 10 5 ♣ A 10 8 5	
WEST ♠ J 7 4 ♡ Q ◇ K Q J 9 3 2 ♣ Q J 2		EAST ♠ K 8 6 3 ♡ 9 8 5 3 ◇ A 8 ♣ 6 4 3
	SOUTH ♠ 5 ♡ A K J 10 6 4 ◇ 7 6 4 ♣ K 9 7	

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1♡	2◇	2♠	Pass
3♡	Pass	4♡	All pass

Opening lead: King of ◇

On the six of hearts, West was forced to discard a low spade and dummy parted with a club. Reading the position beautifully, South led a spade to the ace and then the queen of spades. East covered, South ruffed, and claimed triumphantly when the jack fell from West. Well done.

	NORTH ♠ A Q 10 ♡ Void ◇ Void ♣ A 10 8	
WEST ♠ J 7 4 ♡ Void ◇ Void ♣ Q J 2		EAST ♠ K 8 6 ♡ Void ◇ Void ♣ 6 4 3
	SOUTH ♠ 5 ♡ 6 4 ◇ Void ♣ K 9 7	

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

That's NOT what she said!

Even though 2,068 years have passed since this historical incident, people still talk about this quote, which experts believe was originally the Greek 'kaì sý, téknon' ("you too, child"). (GETTY IMAGES /ISTOCKPHOTO)

Berty Ashley

1 Born on November 2, 1755, Marie Antoinette was the last queen of France before the French Revolution. Five decades after her execution, a certain quote was attributed to her. When the poor people were starving without bread, she was supposed to have said something that showed her disregard for their plight. What is this infamous misquote?

2 Even though 2,068 years have passed since this historical incident, people have been talking about this quote. Experts believe that the actual quote would have been the Greek 'kaì sý, téknon', (you too, child). What is the more popular Latin misquote that exists thanks to William Shakespeare, who wrote it 1,643 years later?

3 Niccolò Machiavelli was an Italian diplomat whose name is used to refer to unscrupulous acts to achieve a goal. This comes from his belief that to succeed in politics, one must engage in deception and treachery. What five-word quote that describes 'Machiavellian' did he not say?

4 'Be the change you wish to see in the world' is a quote that is attributed to this iconic person. The actual quote is "If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him. We need not wait to see what others do.". Who said these inspiring words?

5 This famous quote is from a verse in *The Bible*. The King James version goes "For the love of ___ _ __ ___ _ _ ___: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith...". What misquote that leaves out the first four important words fills in the blank?

6 This iconic quote from sci-fi pop culture has never been uttered onscreen in any format since 1964, when the path-breaking TV show first aired. The line is supposed to be followed by a process of instant transportation. What misquote is this, that name-checks a space engineer?

7 The first word of this phrase is 'Magic', but in popular usage, the second word is repeated. It refers to a device owned by the stepmother of the titular character. The phrase is a question she asks of it, and its answer drives her to carry out an evil plan. What is the question?

8 The actual first word of this famous quote is 'No!'. The oft-repeated misquote, though, starts with the name of the protagonist of the highly popular franchise. What quote leads the list of 'Greatest plot twists of all time'?

9 This iconic phrase is a misquote from the actual person who said it. He had prepared the phrase, probably basing it off a line from *The Hobbit*. When delivering the quote though, he missed an indefinite article. What was the actual quote uttered on July 21, 1969?

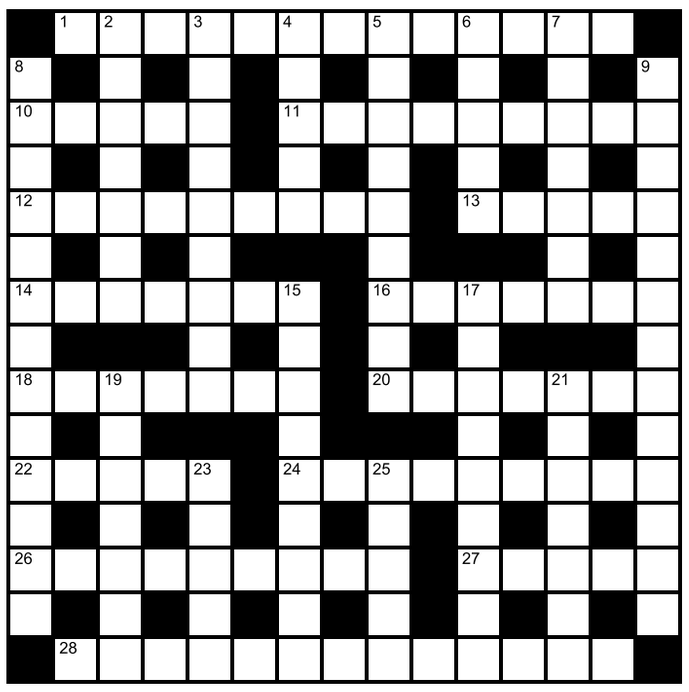
10 The very first recorded use of this quote is from the P.G. Wodehouse novel *Psmith, Journalist*, and not from any work of A.C. Doyle as one would imagine. What iconic quote from the world of detective fiction is this?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. *Let them eat cake.*
2. *Et tu, Brute?* (You too, Brutus?)
3. The end justifies the means.
4. Mahatma Gandhi
5. Money is the root of all evil.
6. Beam me up, Scotty.
7. Mirror, Mirror on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?
8. Luke, I am your father.
9. That's one small step for (a) man, one giant leap for mankind.
10. Elementary, my dear Watson.

***THE HINDU* SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 28** (Set by Arden)



Across
1 Perhaps setter's quick to take rest – making a mess (4,9)
10 Innate presence within, at all times (5)
11 Survive on spin in pitch – it's a play thing (5,4)
12 Drive out in the end with a storyteller (4,5)
13 Remains to enjoy as Charlie becomes quiet (5)
14 Advocate finds another lost copy outside (7)
16 Half the school got zero wrongly for light musical composition (7)
18 Artist's friend protecting terrorists (7)
20 Gathers for service in the main on return (7)
22 Captures Spartacus was somewhat taken back (5)
24 Measure of corporate expansion? (9)
26 Bag of rice provided in offering (9)
27 Additional entry in the next race (5)
28 Fat shape – poised to come in for debate (7,6)

Down
2 No uprising – a riot organised in a province (7)
3 Drools over sales current tax included (9)
4 Estimated that communist party regularly is involved (5)
5 Part of Spain – a land spread America shows interest in (9)
6 Once you went in for getting entry (5)
7 Not even scarry, eating grass is excellent (7)
8 How to make a domesticated animal to become docile, as a man made it (13)
9 Change route misplace gold, perhaps (8,5)
15 With the weeds lies wild flower (9)
17 Cruel when savage becomes sage (9)
19 Leading tap dancer unexpectedly fell into a stupor (7)
21 Oriental massage somehow it has upset America (7)
23 Cut corners and hop over central Denmark (5)
25 Takes Sunday off Putin sleeping (5)

SOLUTION NO. 27

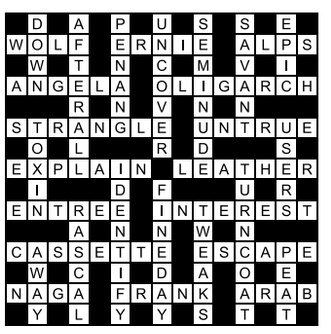


ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R.KUMAR

The child who tried to fly to freedom

The stowaway was fleeing a city broken by fear, a country fractured by violence, and a childhood devoid of safety, not seeking adventure

Shelley Walia
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He was 13, no more than a boy, yet his small body squeezed into a space that defied human endurance. The wheel well of a plane bound from Kabul to New Delhi became his vessel, a narrow metal coffin that promised the impossible dichotomy of escape and survival, a journey beyond the existential boundaries that had hitherto circumscribed his life. His actions bespoke an extraordinary valour, born of the desperation that attends paucity of choice, and infused with the unbridled optimism that often characterises childhood's indomitable spirit. We owe it to him, and to countless others like him, to reflect deeply on what kind of world forces a child to seek freedom at such peril, and whether we are willing to build one where no such flight need ever be taken again.

The wheel well is an abyssal space, a crucible of extremes where human physiology is tested to the breaking point. At cruising altitude, the air is thin, the oxygen almost gone. Temperatures plunge to arctic depths, and the slightest misstep can turn metal into an icy blade. And yet, in this unforgiving realm, he moved with the determination of an explorer. Each inch he crawled, each fold of his small body pressed against the cold steel, was a defiance of limits both human and geopolitical. He had embarked on a voyage that was never meant to be made, and in that impossibility lay the paradox of courage to act when survival itself is uncertain.

One wonders what ran through his mind as the engines roared to life, as the plane shuddered and lifted into the sky. Was it hopelessness that propelled him, the quiet knowledge that the world had left him no safe passage? Or was it the sense of adventure, the intoxicating thrill of stepping into the unknown, of venturing where few have survived? Perhaps it was both despair and wonder intertwined, a dialectical tension that often manifests in children who have learned too early that the world offers little mercy.

His journey calls to mind the unpredictability of human voyages throughout history. The explorers of the Arctic and Antarctica, who faced bone-chilling cold, starvation, and the unknown; the navigators who stumbled upon the West Indies, seeking one world and discovering another much like the storied voyage of Columbus; and the countless travellers who risked death for a chance at new lands, new lives, or new knowledge. Like them, he ventured into the void with only instinct and hope as companions. He aimed for Iran, a land of promise, but fate and geography deposited him down unanticipated paths. The divergence of intention and outcome is cruel, yet it is also a reminder of how unpredictable every human journey can be.

And yet there is a profound tragedy in this story. The boy was not embarking on an expedition to learn, to explore, to write his name in the annals of adventure. He was fleeing the weight of circumstance in a city broken by fear, a country fractured by violence, a childhood stripped of safety. His journey was not heroic in the conventional sense; it was necessary. The act itself, curling into the wheel well, is a quiet testament to human fearlessness in the face of impossible odds.

There is a strange poetry in imagining him there, curled into the wheel well, a tiny figure against the monstrous plane, suspended between earth and sky. He is an explorer of a kind no classroom, no book, no map can teach: an adventurer who charts the contours of fear and the limits of endurance. His journey is a meditation on the strange intersections of desperation and bravery, on how a child can embody both vulnerability and heroism in equal measure.

Astonishing audacity

Perhaps he will survive. Perhaps the journey will mark him forever with scars that cannot be seen but will be known in every pulse of his heart. Perhaps he will carry the memory of the cold, the darkness, the roar of engines as a testament to his own resolve. And perhaps, even if he never reaches the land he first dreamed of, the act to rise above, to risk everything for a chance at freedom, is enough to set him apart. In this sense, he becomes a symbol: not only of the perils of our world but of the quiet, astonishing audacity that can exist even in its most precarious corners.

The boy in the wheel well is both a warning and an elegy. He reminds us of the extremes to which the young and desperate are driven, of the dangers that lie in the spaces where hope meets despair. And yet, he also reminds us of the remarkable capacity for adventure, for defiance, that resides in the smallest among us. In the cold, dark confines beneath the aircraft, he became an explorer, a witness to the extremes of the world, and an emblem of the delicate but fierce persistence of human hope.

What a feat it must be. This young boy's perilous journey eclipses the achievements we typically valorise. While we celebrate athletic feats bound by rules and metrics, his odyssey across the mountains, driven by an existential imperative to survive and thrive, constitutes a profound exploration of human potential deserving the greatest recognition. He may have travelled in darkness, frozen and unseen, yet in that perilous journey he became, for a fleeting flight, a hero of the skies and an explorer of the human spirit.

The carbon debt no one can ignore

Tony Augustine
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Let's face it – life on earth comes with a carbon tab. Every breath, every drive, every foreign holiday or an exotic snack adds to an invisible invoice we have been ignoring for decades. And unlike your streaming subscription, this one does not offer a free trial.

As per the detailed multidimensional calculation by the International Energy Agency (IEA), the average global citizen emits roughly 4.5 tonnes of carbon dioxide annually. Multiply that by a 70-year lifespan, and it becomes 315 tonnes – enough to fill a stadium with guilt. In India, the figure is lower at 2 tonnes per year, but even that adds up to 140 tonnes over a lifetime. Whether you are a minimalist or a maximalist, the climate bill arrives all the same.

Fortunately, nature offers a solution – and it doesn't come with hidden fees. Trees. Yes, the humble, leafy, photosynthesising marvels that quietly clean up our mess.

A mature tree absorbs about 22 kilograms of CO_2 each year. Over 40 years, that is 880 kilograms – or 0.88 tonnes. To offset a lifetime's worth of emissions, you need to plant a minimum 360 trees globally or 160 trees in India. That's roughly five trees a year on a global measure. Or one every time you say, "I forgot my reusable bag – just this once."

But this isn't a call to turn your backyard into a rainforest overnight. Start small. Plant one on your birthday. Gift one to a friend. Name one after your ex – and let it flourish in ways the relationship never did!

Make it a habit. A tree for every milestone. A sapling for every selfie. A grove for every group chat that should have been an email. And don't just plant – protect. Trees need care, water, and yes, the occasional pep talk.

London is no longer the inclusive haven

The recent anti-immigrant protests go against the ethos of the famed city

Thulasi K. Raj
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The year was 2015. This was my first time alone in a foreign country, thousands of miles away from India, my home. I had arrived in London to do a Master's in Law in University College London. Born in a small village in South India where everybody knew everybody, London seemed like another universe to me. In my initial weeks, I sensed what people meant by "cultural shock". I remember staying still on Euston Road and just staring at the people as if they were walking to the end of the world.

The British accent was intimidating, and going to cafes was a task I had to prepare myself for. I would try to imagine the possible questions I would be asked in the strongest English accent – eat in or take away? Latte or Cappuccino? Answers would be rehearsed. It did not work all the time, and if I had to ask someone to repeat for a third time, I would just want to run away and hide in the farthest hole.

The London underground tube was like getting a puzzle for an excited child. The tube maps were little rainbows with differently coloured lines. There was a day I waited for hours at the station, because I did not realise that the tube service was interrupted. There were days I got lost and changed at several stations to get home. I did not know it at the time,

Melting pot Everyone felt at home in London. GETTY IMAGES

but in getting lost, I was finding myself, growing, and becoming.

A couple of months in, I discovered a farmer's market on Fridays close to university. They had a dosa stall selling crispy South Indian delicacies in the dry winter mornings. It was run by immigrant Indians who had beautiful smiles. I tried Spanish paella, and surprised myself for my experiments with food. The city makes space for the loud, but also the quiet ones like me. It can be a sceptic grey cloud, but it also whispers you soft stories.

The city which once freed me failed to free itself; the city which was mine is no longer so

In my class, I met colleagues from all over the world. I was impressed with the breadth of this newfound experience. People came from Australia, Slovenia, Germany, France, and South Africa, reading and learning everything from commercial law to constitutional law. We learnt to complain about the weather like British people do. Friday lunch destinations would be decided by vote and often, YMCA would win, since it offered buffet lunches on student budget. We went for potluck dinners, food markets, and light festivals.

Within a few months, I became a true Londoner. I could tell you the exact number of minutes between Russell Square and King's Cross. I knew stations with long and short exits. I knew where to get the best coffee. I could tell you that walking was better than taking the bus in traffic. I survived on watching old episodes of *IT Crowd*, the best thing ever made by British Television. I could get scones for breakfast and pizza for lunch, and end the day with Indian curry. The city celebrated everything: Deepavali, Id, Christmas, and Holi. I saw Indians and Pakistanis watching cricket matches together. I saw that the most beautiful thing about this city was that it was a potluck in itself. Sitting in the park benches at Russell Square, I told myself: this city had a place for me. London was becoming my second home.

Now, 10 years down the lane, sitting in my living room in India, I remembered everything that London gave me. I remembered voting passionately against Brexit and looking at the college students distributing anti-Brexit pamphlets. I remember people telling me, "Do not worry, it is not about you." In September 2025, I saw reports about the anti-immigrant protest in London joined by a hundred thousand people. I saw the video of a brown girl being chased by the protesters in London – in the very streets I had walked and thrived. It was also about me.

The city which once freed me failed to free itself; the city which was once mine is no longer so. It has become a dark ghost of the wonder that it was; a nightmare from the dream.

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

India's GI system suffers from low awareness, complex registration and weak marketing, with the benefits bypassing real producers. ('Inside India's race for the GI tag'; Oct. 26) Yet, prospects remain strong. Simplified procedures, local facilitation centres, better branding, digital promotion, strong quality control and ensuring fair benefit-sharing can empower artisans, expand exports, and preserve India's geographical and cultural uniqueness.
N.S. Reddy

India's determined effort to secure GI tags for its traditional products reflects a blend of cultural pride and economic savvy. While the boost in income and recognition for artisans is undeniable, the real challenge lies in robust implementation and strategic branding. Merely attaining a GI tag is not enough; artisans need legal know-how, government support, and effective marketing to reap its full benefits.
Avinashiappan Myilsami

City of dreams

Despite being an occasional visitor to Mumbai, there is a sense of familiarity with the 'Only City', thanks to films and cricket. ('Bombay and its main character energy'; Oct. 26) Marine Drive and the cricket grounds were the two images etched in my mind when I first visited the city in 1983. And every time I have gone back, revisiting these places is a must.
Saurabh Sinha

Beyond the screen

Diane Keaton, an actress of immense grace and originality, touched audiences with her performances that felt like life unfolding before our eyes. ('Diane Keaton: she wore her pants, so I could too'; Oct. 26) Her genius lay not in performance, but in presence. In doing so, she reminded us that the highest form of art is not imitation but illumination — the quiet miracle of making the ordinary feel eternal.
Vijay Singh Adhikari

Right to protest

G. Sampath once again uses satire to show how peaceful protest is perceived as being bad for the democracy. ('If you really must protest'; Oct. 26) Even to hold a protest in a peaceful manner against the ongoing wars, where thousands of innocents get killed, a police permission is required. Each State must designate public places with amenities for protesters to express themselves.
B. Sundar Raman

Good and bad times

One should always analyse a relationship dispassionately and arrive at a logical and practical decision. ('*Gogji* for a broken heart'; Oct. 26) Instead of crying over the loss, one should keep the memories of good times close to the heart, cherish and honour them, as Phuphee wisely tells.
Kosaraju Chandramouli

I am unaware if Phuphee is a figment of Saba Mahjoor's imagination but I have begun to revere her as an amateur philosopher. Each story of hers is, in some way, a reflection of situations and problems that have or might develop in life at some point; indeed, Phuphee has taught me some valuable lessons.
Akshita Mishra

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

The sound of time
Clocks have turned from a rarity to a commonplace gadget now
Kalvakuntla Srilatha

Birdspotting from a city home
Spotting rufous treepies flying around the terrace is a big thrill
Sravanthi Challapalli

The grace of letting go
It is about choosing peace over struggle, acceptance over resistance
Vandana Verma

A midnight trespasser
A stranger banging on the door in the dead of the night is the stuff of thrillers
J. Clement Selvaraj

Contributions of up to a length of 700 words may be e-mailed to: openpage@thehindu.co.in Please provide the postal address and a brief background of the writer. The mail must certify that it is original writing, exclusive to this page. The Hindu views plagiarism as a serious offence. Given the large volume of submissions, we regret that we are unable to acknowledge receipt or entertain queries about submissions. If a piece is not published for eight weeks please consider that it is not being used. The publication of a piece on this page is not to be considered an endorsement by The Hindu of the views contained therein.

(Clockwise from below) Visalakshi Ramaswamy; an edition of Craftepreneur; the Kamala store; and an artisan at one of CCI's bazaars. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

KEEPERS OF INDIA'S HANDMADE SOUL

Crafts Council of India turns 60, ably supported by its veteran volunteers. The NGO is now looking to engage with more youngsters

Subha J. Rao

In a country with centuries of rich history, there are many who work towards preserving, reviving and recontextualising India's incredible range of art and craft – from pottery and textile traditions to metal crafts, woodwork, and painting styles such as *pattachitra* and *gond*. But among the forerunners, and one of the most respected, is the Crafts Council of India (CCI).

Social activist Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay established the volunteer-driven NGO, headquartered in Chennai, in 1964. Her vision: a crafts renaissance inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore's commitment to hand production as a catalyst for political and social emancipation. In the last 60 years, CCI and its 12 sister councils have helped further her mission to develop India's handicraft and handloom traditions, establish stronger craftsperson-customer connect, and preserve livelihoods.

The non-profit society has grown exponentially over the years. From travelling into the country's hinterlands to nurture artisanal skill, to creating legacy initiatives such as CCI's crafts bazaars that brought languishing crafts to customers in the metros. The last six decades have also seen its style of functioning change: from organic growth to a more focused approach.

Gita Ram, 82 – who recently passed on her mantle of chairperson to Visalakshi Ramaswamy, 79 – remembers how things were when she joined the CCI about 47 years ago. "We did some very interactive things in the early days. Creating awareness about craft traditions was key to us. I remember an all-India terracotta workshop we conducted, and another one on basket weaving. Everyone learnt – the artisans, the public, and us in the CCI," she says. "In the 80s, the focus moved to revival. [For instance] our focus was on Tamil Nadu's *kalchettis* [stoneware]. We partly contributed a lathe, and got orders from Japan too." She points out, however, that not all initiatives were successful. The *kalchetti* intervention picked up pace only decades later. "I felt we worked ahead of time," says Ram. "The time for stoneware came after the pandemic. Today, in the same village near Salem, 15 lathes are in operation."

Bazaars and design interventions

Ramaswamy is already a formidable name in the industry as a champion of Chettinad's culture and crafts. Her work with the region's *kottans* (palm leaf baskets) especially are well known via her M. Rm. Rm. Cultural Foundation. Ramaswamy, who has been associated with CCI for 33 years, shares how a lot more crafts were alive in her time, and many more craftspersons were around. "I will never say crafts are on the wane. We have enough consumers for craft, but we must go back to that phase when it was found in everyday life," she says. "Ornamentation can only sustain you so much. Now, the time is right to increase numbers, but it won't happen on its own."

Ram and Ramaswamy speak of how many craftspeople who began with CCI's exhibitions, went on to achieve national, even international, fame. In fact, the biannual Sarees of India exhibition by its sister, Delhi Crafts Council, has seen the likes of now well-known designers such as Anavila Misra, Gunjan Jain and Sanjay Garg.

The organisation has consistently stepped up with encouragement, ideas, and marketing help for artisans. Their craft bazaars, annual textile exhibitions, and the more recent Craftepreneur, an exhibition of re-imagined crafts and textiles created by young designers, are great examples. Besides opening new retail opportunities, they also helped craftspeople understand that India was not a homogenous market. "For example, someone once brought woollen clothes to a Chennai exhibition. Now they know better," smiles Ramaswamy. Both the bazaar and Craftepreneur were discontinued during the pandemic, but now plans are on to resurrect them in the new year.

Lessons for textile influencers

At a time when textile revivalists and fashion documentors are growing on social media, CCI is an example of how it is really done. Members immerse themselves in the craft, often travelling and spending weeks with artisans, doing research, documenting, training, and advocacy. A recent example is the Golu Doll Project, where CCI worked with doll makers in Kanchipuram. Their design intervention helped the artisans create new moulds, and embrace a more vintage aesthetic and colour palette.

The power of Kamala

For many, CCI's Kamala stores, with its beautifully curated saris, fabrics and products, is the face of the organisation. And why not? All sister councils across the country run their own store, and they not only retail crafts, but also conduct workshops and talks by artists, and teach artisans marketing and accounting. While many, including the Kolkata store, shut down over the pandemic, most have reopened. "The store is a unique space, showcasing a diverse range of crafts under one roof," says Samyukta, adding that the Chennai store will host a *paithani* pop-up towards the end of November. "At Kamala, we celebrate exquisite craftsmanship, and collaborate with artisan communities to create innovative designs."

According to Ram, CCI allows for continuous learning. It also helps that money is not on the radar. "We are all volunteers, and that matters. No one earns any money; so, there's no issue of who is bigger or smaller. We are here to celebrate craft," she says. The society used to depend on government funding, but has now opened up more revenue sources, especially from corporate CSR quotas.

There's no hierarchy here

Many tend to think the CCI is full of veterans, mostly women – draped in handloom saris and unending passion. Among those who broke that notion is Chennai-based designer Vikram Phadke, 62, who joined the CCI in his 20s. A friend at the National Institute of Design introduced him to the council. "I got really involved because this is an amazing organisation where everyone works quietly. There's no hierarchy really, and everyone bonds over their love for craft," he explains.

Craftspersons, he adds, have a lot of love for the CCI, because the members helped them get the one thing that was missing in their lives – respect. "I think that, across councils, everyone deals with artists with great sensitivity," he says. "We spend a lot of time together, they stay with us during exhibitions. No one really stakes ownership here, for everyone is in service of the craft."

Going forward, Ramaswamy's brief for the next two years is to focus on more sustainable and green things – natural materials and natural dyes, for instance. She also wants the new council to work with students, so that they understand the value of the country's crafts heritage.

"We encourage people to come forward and support our mission to help craftspeople," says Jayasri Samyukta, a fashion designer and, at 44, one of the younger members of CCI's executive committee. "We regularly host students and interns from colleges across India working on projects. In the coming months and under the leadership of our new chairperson, the committee will work together to chart the council's way forward."

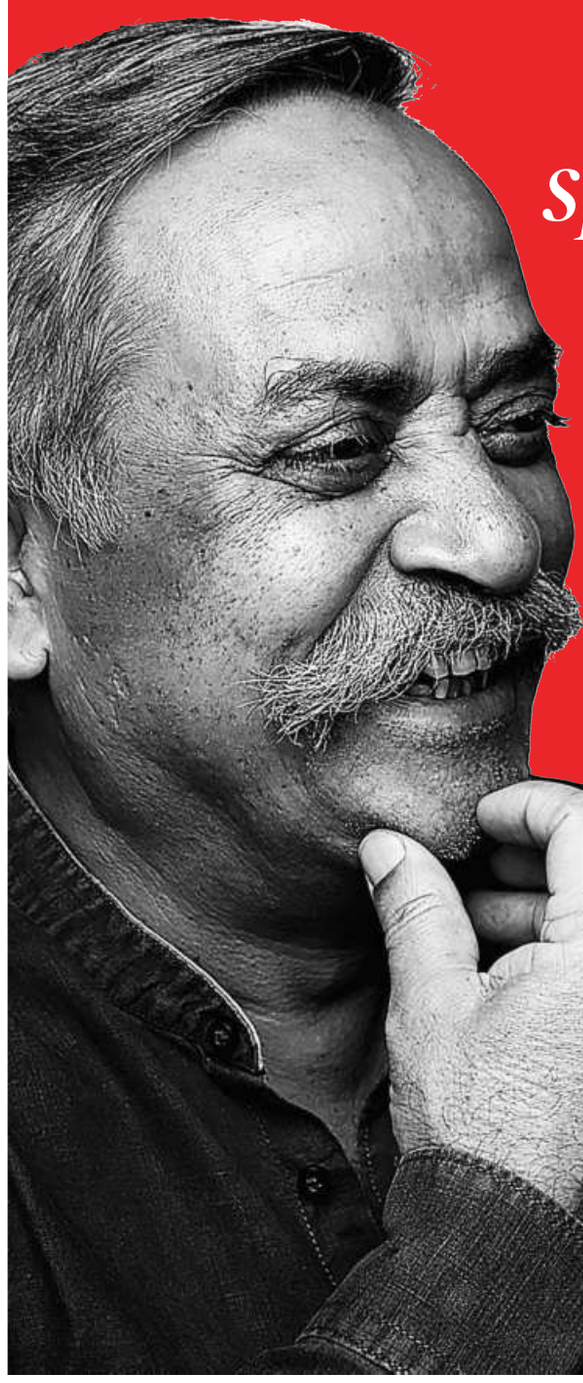
The independent journalist is based in Mangaluru.

– With inputs from ***Surya Praphulla Kumar***

TRIBUTE | 1955 - 2025

Sometimes greatness sports a Rajput moustache

Veteran adman Bobby Pawar remembers his former boss and forever friend — a man who taught him to be tougher, overcome insecurities, and laugh harder



Bobby Pawar

In Mumbai, usually the 25th of October is hot and sunny. Not that day. Perhaps, it was the emotions of the multitude who had come to pay their last respects to a legend that made the sky turn gloomy and tearful.

To be honest, I never think of him as a legend. He is just Piyush. (As long as I am, he won't be 'was'.) He is a man to climb the mountains with. For you knew he would push you onwards when you were ready to give up. Pull you up, if you were in danger of falling. Then burst forth with that trademark booming laugh, as if what he did for you was nothing. He was like that with the folks (creatives, planners, servicing) who were lucky enough to be his flock. Even his clients. So many brands and people reached great heights because of his – planted in the rich soil of life – creativity. Effortless leadership. Relentless humanity. Now he's up there, doing the same thing with the angels.

We have been awash in tributes to his incredible work. His transformational imprint on Indian advertising. Even his glorious moustache. So, I will refrain from adding my '*do boond*' to that particular Ganges of fulsome praise. Instead, I will talk about the man I love, who I believe loves me back. Though neither of us have said so to each other. Not in so many words. At least, not while we were sober enough to remember. That is the tragedy of being born and raised as a 'Man'. We are taught that the silence of a tight hug says more than the wagging of the tongue. But sometimes the ears need to hear what the heart already knows.

A man with an endearing side

I will say this, Piyush doesn't have a funny bone in his body. His skeleton is infused with humour. But he doesn't always have the greatest confidence in his jokes. Maybe that is why he laughed the moment he was done telling one. Laughed before we could, as a prompt to our own hilarity. I thought it was so endearing that a man who is so confident in everything could be a tad insecure about such a little thing. It made me comfortable with my own insecurities. And gave me the strength to overcome them.

Friends (with Pawar in the centre, in red glasses) hitting the nearest bar to celebrate Piyush and his legacy. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

I learnt that, and so much more from him. Learnt to showcase my ideas from the hard class of him inviting people into his room by telling them, 'Bobby may have a good idea. Watch how he murders it.' Their chuckles made me tougher. Watching how he presented, got people into the world of the story he was telling, made me better. I also learnt the value of insights when he started charging me ₹50 for every idea I came up with that was just clever. After I had imbibed the dictum 'when you move the heart, the head will follow', he gave me the bounty he had collected. Of course, my colleague Anil Bathwal and I promptly spent it on sampling the delights of Rasna Pub.

For a short time, Bathwal and I were partners at Ogilvy India and Ogilvy New York. It didn't take us long to become brothers. But Piyush bound us closer still, when he took to calling us Bobby Bathwal while summoning, praising, and berating us. It got so bad that when we started winning awards, people from other agencies thought it was some dude called Bobby Bathwal who did the work. Thanks for fusing our individuality, Piyush. And bossman, just in case you don't get it, I am being sarcastic.

Raising a glass of Teachers

I am literally smiling through my tears as I write this. Smiling at the memory of Piyush exasperatedly pounding on my keyboard to stop the video game that Bathwal and I were playing against each other on our computers. Smiling about the time we emotionally blackmailed him into switching from (IMFL) Royal Challenge to Teachers just because I wanted to drink scotch and couldn't afford it. And I am crying because Piyush will never again tell me, 'Robert, *mere liye ek drink banaa*.'

After the funeral was over, some of us did the most Piyush thing we could. We hit the nearest bar to raise a toast to the man. I had a large whisky, with two cubes of ice and soda. It took time, but Piyush had finally returned the favour. He had emotionally blackmailed me into giving up my now usual single malt for a shot of Teachers.

The writer is the former chairman and chief creative officer at Havas Group.